

Lorem Ipsum: The Rise of Junk Latin

It is artificial to divide living languages into ‘good’ (i.e. correct) and ‘bad’ examples. ‘Bad’ or ‘basolectic’ Latin accompanied its entire life (Farrell 2001), and was ultimately responsible for the Romance languages. This now-dead language has also produced numerous ghosts. There are many examples of Joke Latin and related language games, from Macaronic texts of the fifteenth century to the present, to Edward Lear’s Nonsense Botany (*Bottlephorkia spoonifolia*) and Warner Brothers’ *Road Runner* cartoons (*Birdibus Zippibus*). However, in recent decades a new form of Latin has emerged, one used widely in a mainly non-Latinist world, and which carries only the appearance or sound of a language. This paper will trace the rise of Junk Latin.

Junk Greek, thanks to its lack of a familiar alphabet, makes constant appearances in popular visual media: in the Steve Reeves movie *Hercules* (1957), gravestones bear random Greek characters; there are dozens more examples from film and videogames. Anglophone film and television regularly use Σ for E because the capital epsilon ‘doesn’t look *Greek* enough’ (Nisbet 2006: 96). The overtones of classical culture are at their strongest in text that communicates form rather than content. The non-fluent target audience has been primed by modern culture for receiving various messages from little more than visual impact.

This also applies to Latin (Briggs 2008) which, among non-English languages, has even more advantages than ancient Greek: it is not ‘owned’ by anyone, being dead, yet can still be half-familiar to anyone who reads English. It is inscriptional and lapidary; thanks to its currency throughout most of European history, it can even carry overtones of the mysterious, the intellectual, and the occult. In the nineteenth century, made-up languages were called Latin (e.g. Pig Latin). They resembled real Latin: a code for insiders only.

Latin has historically been employed as verbal communication, whether correct or incorrect. Visual impact and ‘feel’ are now surpassing communication: the most common example is *Lorem Ipsum*, the world’s favorite dummy text. As spotted by Richard McClintock, ex-classicist Director of Publications at Hampden-Sydney College, it is based on Cicero (*De Finibus* 32) with omissions and other scribal errors introduced. Commentators claim that the text was transmitted unchanged from a nineteenth-century printer’s sample, and may date much further back than this. Arguably, this isn’t true at all, and ‘Lorem Ipsum’ was created as late as the sixties, when it is first attested.

Lorem Ipsum was available for many years on adhesive sheets in different sizes and typefaces from a company called Letraset. Since then it has spread into various electronic media. Laura Perry, art director for the first ever desktop publishing program (*PageMaker*, launched 1985), borrowed *Lorem Ipsum* from typography samples. The first few words now appear in Apple’s *Pages* software, and in Microsoft Word online Help. It is now also widely used by webpage designers, circulated by websites such as <http://www.loremipsum.net> and <http://www.lipsum.com> as a readable-looking but non-readable filler. A Google search for ‘lorem ipsum’ now produces over ten million results.

Latin was widely used in text samples by the pre-electronic print trade. For example, the opening of Cicero's *In Catilinam* 1 was popular in type specimen books. The eighteenth-century printer William Caslon (1692-1766) always used this passage; it also appears in the catalogue of George Lothian (1841). But no extant examples contained errors. The point of the Latin sample text has now changed.

Junk Latin shows us what this language signifies to people outside the classically-trained minority which 'owns' it. Countless modern brand names are Latin-sounding, for example Japanese luxury cars (*Acura, Lexus, Infiniti*) and British companies (British Steel is now *Corus*, Norwich Union is now *Aviva*, the Royal Mail was briefly *Consignia*). They are perceived to carry impressive overtones – grandeur, historical authenticity, and an implicit connection with elite culture of various kinds. Latin is the language of monumental architecture, of Western empires, of popes and lawyers and scientists. Such words seem partly familiar; their meaning is suggested rather than stated.

Before the mid-twentieth century, Junk Latin would have looked like the work of an incompetent. Now, enabled by the fall in Latin literacy and the accompanying rise in its glamour (Goodrich 2003), this supreme example of Junk Latin has now developed a history of its own, and we are in the age of *Lorem Ipsum*.

Works Cited:

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